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New storm threat ends homecoming for St. Bernard, N.O. residents

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and Gordon Russell
Staff writers

Just as the region inched toward functional, the specter of Tropical Storm Rita prompted some officials across the New Orleans region to revoke plans for residents' return, fearing more rain could overtake already weakened levees and cause further flooding.

Mayor Ray Nagin suspended plans to let Uptowners return later this week and asked Algiers residents, who were allowed to come back to their homes Monday, to evacuate. And St. Bernard halted re-entry plans altogether and imposed a mandatory evacuation beginning today at 4 a.m.

"I'm hopeful people have seen the effects of Katrina, and that we won't have the same problems this time," Nagin said. "If anyone wants to sit this storm out with our soaked levee systems, then God bless them."

With Rita on the horizon, President Bush late Monday announced another visit to New Orleans, likely this afternoon. Earlier in the day, he expressed concern about Nagin's plan for the return and said his administration had passed that along to city officials.

"The mayor has got this dream about having a city up and running. And we share that dream," he said during a briefing. "But we also want to be realistic about some of the hurdles and obstacles that we all confront in repopulating New Orleans."

Bush added: "If it were to rain a lot, there is concern from the Army Corps of Engineers that the levees might break. And so, therefore, we're cautious about encouraging people to return at this moment of history."

As Hurricane Rita moved west toward southernmost Florida and the Florida Keys on Monday, forecasters warned the storm could reach Category 3 or greater strength by Thursday and could threaten New Orleans and the rest of Louisiana's coastline.

"Start making preparations to leave now" if you live on the coastal area, Gov. Kathleen Blanco said late Monday afternoon. "Prepare your family, prepare your house for evacuation."

A direct hit risks overtopping what's left of the city's hurricane-protection levee system, which corps officials and contractors are working feverishly to restore. Even if Rita is a near-miss that delivers heavy rainfall to the city, it could cause 2 feet to 4 feet of flooding in many areas that just dried out or haven't yet, New Orleans District Engineer Col. Richard Wagenaar said.

National Hurricane Center Director Max Mayfield warned that Rita seemed to be following a pattern of recent storms in having its initial forecast path erode eastward, shifting from Brownsville, Texas, on Sunday to Corpus Christi early Monday and then eastward to Galveston by 5 p.m.

Landfall is predicted for Saturday with winds of 120 mph.

Nagin said he had seen a forecast from a meteorologist who is "usually on the money," whom he did not name, that showed Rita landing in Terrebonne Parish as a Category 3 hurricane.

That would put New Orleans on the dangerous east side of the storm, likely causing a storm surge of 10 feet or more, he said. At the moment, he said a storm surge of 3 feet, or rainfall of 9 inches or more, would cause substantial flooding in the city.

Coast Guard Vice Adm. Thad Allen had already publicly questioned whether Nagin's timeline to bring back residents of the Uptown and French Quarter neighborhoods, among those least damaged by Hurricane Katrina, was overly ambitious.

Allen cited the lack of vital city services, including drinking water, sewerage, a working 911 system and a lack of functioning emergency rooms, and said the plan was "extremely problematic."

Earlier in the day, Nagin was quoted as sarcastically calling Allen the "federally appointed mayor of New Orleans."

At the news conference, he called Allen "a good man."

But, he added, "When he starts talking to the citizens of New Orleans, he's kind of out of his league. There's only one mayor of New Orleans, and I'm it."

But Councilwoman Jacquelyn Brechtel Clarkson, whose district includes Algiers and the French Quarter, urged residents to stay where they are until Rita's path becomes clearer. She estimated that about a third of Algiers' 60,000 residents returned Monday, the first day that Nagin opened up the city for re-entry.

Elsewhere in the region, Jefferson Parish officials said they were keeping a close watch on Rita, but they had yet to order any evacuation of those who recently returned to their neighborhoods.

"We're in such a state now, with our infrastructure so vulnerable, that we can't take a hit of any order," said Walter Maestri, Jefferson Parish's emergency management director.

"Obviously we're taking this storm very, very seriously," said Federal Emergency Management Agency spokesman David Passey. As Tropical Storm Rita moves closer to the Gulf of Mexico, the agency has started conducting a daily videoconference with the National Hurricane Center in Miami to track its progress.

If the storm were to take direct aim at south Louisiana, where thousands of federal workers are helping in the Hurricane Katrina recovery, FEMA would likely evacuate most of those employees and leave only an operational team in place to ride out the storm. But so far there have been no decisions on whether such an evacuation will be needed, Passey said.

"We're all going to know more in a couple of days" about where the storm is heading, Passey said.

Work continued to repair the damage from Katrina's blast three weeks ago. At the 17th Street levee, dump trucks brought loads of crushed concrete as Boh Brothers construction workers continued to stabilize the berm that stands where the levee was breached.

"We're monitoring the situation 24-7," said Couser Hano, an equipment operator as he worked inside a bulldozer. "You don't ever second-guess Mother Nature."

The berm, he said, is strong, but workers were preparing for Rita. "It's stable. We've had bulldozers, cranes, dump trucks on it. You can put anything you want on it, and it's gonna hold."

On the city side of the breach, levee walls lay buried like tossed playing cards. Lakeview homes were shifted, broken and torn like drowned doll houses, and three large oaks were upended in a lake of seepage, their massive rootballs exposed. A chain-link fence snaked along riven earth pushed back from the canal. "Look," one worker said, pointing to ripples in the lake. "A gar fish."

Several 60-foot steel, sheet pilings had been driven into the canal at the Old Hammond Highway bridge, forming walls

in the water near the sides of the canal. Corps officials said they were prepared to drive more piles and close the gap, and they were working to reinforce weakened areas of the levee system.

"We have contingency plans," said project manager David Wurtzel. "It really depends on the path of the storm. There are a lot of possibilities we can offer, as far as protection." He said crew members would be able to shut down their operation at the canal within four hours.

Wagenaar said workers also are moving temporary pumps to strategic locations throughout the city in anticipation of heavy rainfall accompanying Rita.

But the temporary pumps can only provide a very small fragment of the flow that the fixed stations are capable of, he said. "You can't compare even one of our 42-inch pumps to one of the 1,000 cubic feet per second pumps in the city."

Staff writers Bruce Hamilton, Michelle Krupa, Kate Moran, Paul Rioux and Mark Schleifstein contributed to this story.

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